Research Methods Overview

This module will guide you through the process of choosing goals and objectives for your project.
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What is it?

Research is the process of gathering information to better understand a situation, event, group, etc. People do research all the time in informal ways. For example, when we try to figure out how something works or why something doesn’t work, this is a form or research. By taking that every day, informal process and making it deliberate and systematic, we can increase our understanding (of the conflict, people, country, situation, community, etc.) and make better decisions about the projects or programs we develop. There are two types of research, which will be detailed, later in this module: **Qualitative** and **Quantitative** research.

*Objectivity* is one of the key aspects critical to gathering information in a way that can be impartial. Objectivity does not mean that the researcher has no opinions or biases; everyone enters a situation with at least some beliefs or opinions that will affect what is seen or heard. Rather, objectivity means that the researcher identifies his/ her biases and examines all aspects of the research before reaching a conclusion.

**Important Questions to ask before deciding on what type of research to use**

1. What is the information that is required?
2. How will you use this information?
3. From which stakeholders will you get this information?
4. What are the most appropriate tools for collecting the information?

When should it be used?

Research is used before (design) and during (monitoring) a project, as well as during the evaluation phase. During the design phase of a project, gathering information (collecting data) can be used to understand what needs to be done in a situation or community, and can also be used to develop baseline information before the project begins. Using research tools during a project (monitoring) can help the project make changes when needed and strengthen aspects that are working well. Evaluation uses research to help the project determine whether the goals were reached, and to gather broader lessons that can help develop additional projects.

Who should be involved?

Keep in mind that the following varies by project, context, and personnel:
Project manager, DME Coordinator and staff and relevant stakeholders should all agree on the purpose of the research, its methodology, and so forth.

The DME Specialist in the DC office can be used as a resource or facilitator for the initial discussions and review of the goal and chosen objectives.

How to conduct research?

In order for the information to be as accurate and helpful as possible, it is important that the process of collecting information be deliberate and systematic. The steps outlined below can help you to design a process that can be used in a variety of situations.

It is critical throughout all of these steps to document what you are doing, what decisions you have made, where and why you made changes. Take notes every chance you have. This will help you to keep moving forward instead of having to rethink decisions, and will also help you to determine why something worked or didn’t work as you look back over the process.

1) Be clear about why you want the information and what you hope to do with it. What questions are you trying to answer?

2) Gather background or contextual knowledge about the situation, group, setting, etc. The more you already know about a situation before you start doing the research, the better focused—and therefore more useful—your research will be.

3) Decide what data collection tool(s) would be most appropriate for the kind of information you want to gather. Once you are clear about what kind of information you want, you can then think about the best ways of gathering that information. There are many different kinds of data collection tools and each of them will produce different kinds of information. Any of the following can be used:

   - Surveys
   - Interviews
   - Focus Groups
   - Observation
   - Case Study

4) Develop the specific tool(s) you need Each of these tools can be used in different ways, varying in degrees between structured and unstructured. See the Data Collection Tools Module to learn how to create a specific tool for your situation.
5) Test the tools you’ve created

Before beginning the research, test each of the tools you’ve created to make sure that they will actually gather the information you are looking for. Many times, other people will understand questions that make sense to you differently. If you are using a survey, test it on a small number of people and ask them for feedback on how well they understand the questions. Look at their answers on the survey to see if they are the kinds of answers that fit what you are hoping to learn. The same applies for interviews and focus groups.

This testing process can be difficult because an open mind must be maintained when looking at the information. Even if you don’t agree with or like what you are hearing, you must continue to think about the quality, not content, of the information, and whether it will be useful in designing, monitoring or evaluating the project. A question should not be changed just because the answer is not one that you wanted to hear.

6) Do the research

Quantitative research

Quantitative research is a study involving the use and analyses of numerical data and using statistical techniques. They pose questions of who, what, when, where, how much, how many, and how.

Quantitative techniques depict various elements of research in terms of numbers.

Quantitative research methods are designed to produce statistically reliable data that tells us how many people do or think something.

Quantitative data typically is in numerical form such as averages, ratios or ranges.

What can quantitative research be used for?

Quantitative research is especially useful when carrying out a large scale needs assessment or baseline survey. It is independent of the researcher and one should get similar results no matter who carries out the research. It can also be used to measure trends.

Quantitative Research and the Researcher.

Quantitative research is usually independent of the researcher and would generally reveal the same results irrespective of the researcher provided that the methodologies are similar.
When should Quantitative Research be used?
Quantitative research should be used under the following circumstances:

- When trying to measure a trend such as ‘do youth talk to their parents about issues important to them?’
- When data can be obtained in numerical forms such as ‘number of children under 15 who participate in peacebuilding activities’.
- When simple objective responses can be received such as yes and no questions.
- There is no uncertainty about the concepts being measured, and there is only one way to measure each concept.
- You are trying to collect data in ratios, percentages and averages.

Advantages

- Can be used when large quantities of data need to be collected.
- The result is usually numerical (quantifiable) and hence considered more “objective”.
- The data is considered quantifiable and usually generalizable to a larger population.
- It can allow SFCG to see changes overtime and help develop quantitative indicators.
- It can provide a clear, quantitative measure to be used for grants and proposals.

Disadvantages

- Results need to be calculated using Excel, Access, or data analysis software (such as SPSS), which may not always be accessible to a country program.
- Time consuming, as the researcher or SFCG team member needs to enter, clean and then analyse the data.
- The larger the sample, the more time it takes to analyse the data and analyse results.
- The larger the sample the more time it takes to collect data.
- The quantitative data ignores a very important human element.
How do we use Quantitative Research?
Quantitative research can be conducted by using a variety of methods of numerical data collection. They are:

- **Surveys** are a quantitative method involving the use of questionnaires and aim to generalize from a representative sample population to a larger population of interest.

- **Mini surveys** or informal surveys are a quantitative method for collecting program information quickly. They involve relatively small population samples using brief questionnaires that focus on a limited numbers of variables. Mini-surveys are very useful for organizations that have projects of relatively short duration and are carrying out interventions with well-defined expectations.

**Example**
In Liberia, the Talking Drum Studio (TDS) Evaluation conducted in 1999 discovered that a larger percentage of the uneducated or less educated Liberian population listened to the TDS than the educated elite. Approximately 82.5% of people with no or low levels of education and 89.4% with some education listened to TDS compared to 76.8% of the people with high levels of education. In order to measure the efficacy and reputation of the Talking Drum Studio (TDS) surveys were carried out which asked questions such as “Does the TDS tell the truth” with fixed responses to choose from such as “very often” “sometimes” and “never”. Since none of the participants selected “never” it could be stated that all participants believed that TDS spoke the truth “very often” or “sometimes.”
Qualitative research

Qualitative research does not analyse or use statistical data. It is interpretive research that accommodates the idea that human behaviour is subjective and influenced by environment and circumstances. Qualitative research focuses more on the *how* and *why* of human actions and situations rather than what and when. This type of research is designed to obtain people’s perspectives and views. They help us understand why people do certain actions and how they have reached that stage.

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**What is Qualitative research used for?**

Qualitative research is used for studying and understanding human opinions and actions. It is used to understand the reasons as to why a conflict developed and how a possible consensus can be achieved. It is useful in accommodating the human element and recognizing that social data concerning man is subjective.

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**Consent forms**

- All interviewees must give their agreement to participate.
- Interviewers should make sure that interviewees know they can refuse to respond to questions (that is why we always include “no response” in the list of possible response) or stop the interview at any time.
- Investigators must provide interviewees with information about the activity in a manner appropriate to their culture and education.
- Consent forms and informational tools should be developed with community members and field-tested.

For more information on consent forms refer to the Data Collection Tools Module.
When should qualitative research be used?
Qualitative research should be used under the following circumstances:
- When there is no existing data on the topic
- The most appropriate unit of measurement is unclear (individuals? Households? Organizations?)
- When studying why people do what they do, or why they believe in what they believe
- When trying to understand how a situation came about
- When a more in depth understanding of an issue is needed

Advantages
- Versatility
- Gives the interviewer the opportunity to probe further and to ask more questions
- It gives depth to an interview and makes the data “rich” i.e. Qualitative research generates rich and detailed data

Disadvantages
- Researcher may only know roughly in advance what he/she is looking for
- The design emerges as the study unfolds
- The data analysis and data collection is labour intensive and time consuming
- Qualitative data is vulnerable to the researchers bias/subjectivity

Qualitative Research and the Researcher. In qualitative research the information revealed is very much dependent on the type and quality of the researcher. Asking the right kind of follow up probing questions with a certain kind of listening style can reveal very different data from someone asking only a set group of questions.
Qualitative research can be conducted by using a variety and combination of different methods of data collection

- **Case Studies** are intended to provide a focused assessment of causal relationships, contributory or otherwise, between the intervention and specific outcomes or impacts. (See the Data Collection Tools Module for descriptive instructions.)

  **Selecting participants**
  Carefully consider the following when selecting participants

  **Gender:** Will both men and women feel comfortable discussing the topic in a mixed gender group?

  **Identity:** Will people of different religious/ethnic/other identity backgrounds talk freely together?

  **Age:** How intimidating would it be for a young person to be included in a group of older adults or vice versa?

  **Power:** Would a soldier be likely to make candid remarks in a group where his/her supervisor is also a participant?

- **Focus Group Discussions** consist of expertly moderated small-group discussion (7-11 people) that centres on the perceptions and experiences of knowledgeable beneficiaries concerning issues of interest to the project/programme undertaking the study. Their perceptions and experiences are elicited via carefully structured but open-ended questions. (See the Data Collection Tools Module for descriptive instructions.)
Example: *Focus Groups during the Baseline in Nepal*
- One aim of a focus group discussion would be to identify perceptions and the range of opinion about participating in national elections.
- The indicator could be: “Perceptions about voting responsibilities” and the focus group discussion could aim to understand what people think about this responsibility, whether they think it exists, what the parameters are and why they think what they do.
- One question for the group could be ‘How is voting in a national election relevant to people in this village?’
- The facilitator would aim to keep the discussion focused on this question and to encourage and document what people responses are, on what do they all agree, where are there differences, why are national elections considered to be important/unimportant? Etc.

- **Key Informant Interviews** are qualitative, in-depth interviews of people selected for their first-hand knowledge about a topic. The interviews are loosely structured, relying on a list of issues to be discussed, or a simple interview guide, and resemble a conversation, allowing a free flow of ideas and information. (See the Data Collection Tools Module for descriptive instructions.)

**Sample Questions for Interview and Focus Group discussions**

- How has the children’s program Nashe Maalo impacted your child’s choice of friends?
- What are some of the challenges facing the Liberian society after the elections? Why do you think this is so?
- What in your opinion are the three biggest issues facing your society today? Why is this? What do you think can be done to help resolve these issues?
- What are the 3 key recommendations that you feel are most needed to help resolve this issue? Why is this?

- **Open-ended mini surveys** are surveys that contain a few very specific questions that require the participant to provide a detailed response based on what they believe or have experienced rather than a response that is quantifiable. (See the Data Collection Tools Module for descriptive instructions.)
Observation is a process in which an evaluator collects information about events as they occur in their natural setting. It can be used to set the basis for both quantitative and qualitative data collection. (See the Data Collection Tools Module for descriptive instructions.)

Story Telling is the telling of a happening or connected series of happenings in the form of a story or account. The storytelling method allows SFCG to receive first hand information on an event that has happened from the perspective of a person that took part in it. It provides the perspective and interpretations of the interviewee, and therefore it is most useful when SFCG needs that kind of personal insight.

Mixed method research

A research model does not need to be just one single model. In most cases the most appropriate methodology in the field of conflict transformation is a mixed method approach where quantitative methods like surveys are combined with in-depth interviews and story telling. This accommodates the need for both “objective data” (breadth of an issue) and the “human element” (depth of an issue).

So, when you design your methodology, look for the type of research that works best. It may mean that will be using surveys, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews. Create the best combination in order to acquire the appropriate information.
Example
In Morocco a mixed method approach was used when interviewing participants from the ADR outreach conference in Rabat. Some of the questions asked were “What do you think are the general issues affecting the development of ADR in Morocco?” “What types of support to the ADR process in Morocco do you think are required?” “On a scale of 1 for no understanding to 5 for complete understanding, how would you rate your comprehension of mediation theory? (circle number)
1 - no understanding
2 – poor understanding
3 – average understanding
4 – good understanding
5 – excellent understanding”
Additional Resources

The following resources are particularly good for research methods.

http://www.crs.org/publications/pdf/Gen1199_e.pdf

*In Search of Strategy: An Agenda for Applied Research on Transitions from Conflict.*
http://www.fafo.no/pub/rapp/480/480.pdf

Audience Dialogue. *Qualitative or Quantitative Research?*
http://www.audiencedialogue.org/qualiquant.html

Cheyanne Church and Mark Rogers. Designing for results. SFCG. Chapter 12.
http://www.sfcg.org/programmes/ilr/ilt_manualpage.html

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